

The Passage of Bob Dylan

by Alan Wall

Tomorrow is a long time

At the time of John F. Kennedy's assassination Dylan was afraid that he too might be killed.¹ Leaving aside his proverbial paranoia, what this fear showed is the extent to which Dylan considered himself 'involved': he obviously thought that he was making a statement in his music radical enough for him to be made the target of a politically-directed bullet. Dylan was connected professionally with the Civil Rights Movement and was made into a young hero by that amorphous political and social group, but at certain points in his early career his own perspectives transcended the liberal optimism of the Civil Rights slogans.

Some of Dylan's early songs were not in that one-dimensional rhetorical accusative one came to expect of the New York City folk crowd. Dylan became aware very quickly that there was only a simple answer to everything if you were simple enough to accept it. He did not wish to be made into a solo version of Peter, Paul and Mary, megaphoning easily-digestible platitudes to an auditorium full of hungry college students. In an early, unreleased song about Hezekiah Jones he 'accuses' the white 'rednecks', the undifferentiated, anonymous, philistine mass who hide behind their respectable beliefs. But he was really more intelligent than that: he knew that the poor whites were as much victims of 'society's pliers' as the exploited blacks (though often less spectacularly so).

His song, *Only a Pawn in their Game*, must surely rank as one of the most intelligent contemporary political comments upon the murder of Medgar Evers. Dylan sings this song from the perspective not of the murdered black hero, the obvious 'protest' angle, but through the eyes of the white man who shoots him. He describes his poverty, his lack of education, his longings and his manipulation by politicians into directing his energy and frustration against the blacks:

'But the laws are with him,
To protect his white skin,
To keep up his hate,
So he never thinks straight,
'Bout the shape that he's in,

¹I take this information from Anthony Scaduto's book *Bob Dylan*, which must rank as one of the most glaringly wasted biographical opportunities of recent years. It is written in the journalese one finds in sensationalist American magazines. Dylan's sole response to any occasion throughout the whole of his adolescence appears to have consisted of leaping around the room shouting 'Hey, hey f*** wild.'

But it ain't him to blame :
He's only a pawn in their game.'

The simple irony of that recurrent stanzaic conclusion points ambiguously to both the manipulation of the whites and also to their disavowal of responsibility. In the recorded version of the song on the *Times They Are a'Changing* album Dylan's voice, hoarsely staggering from line to line with a rhythmically-broken guitar accompaniment, enacts the futility of the vicious circle he is describing. The conclusion of the song points out, by implication rather than rhetorical harrassment, that in a system where one only becomes a political hero by sensationalism or by being the victim of a sensationalist crime, the real victims are those who must continue to live in oppressed obscurity :

'Today Medgar Evans was buried from the bullet he caught.
They're lowering him down as a king.
But when the shadowy sun
Sets on the one
That fired the gun
You'll see by his grave
On the stone that remains
Carved next to his name
His epitaph plain :
Only a pawn in their game.'

There are a number of other songs of this standard in Dylan's early work. One example is *North Country Blues*, a perceptive study of the decline of an American mining town through the removal of investment to more exploited and lucrative regions. In this song he once again avoids the easy traps of the usual protest song by adopting the persona of a miner's wife who witnesses the decline, both of her husband and of the town itself, from the condemned cell of domestic hopelessness. The tone throughout the song is perfect, the situation it describes realistic, and the subtlety and restraint of the lyrics rare even amongst the very best folk songs :

'They complained in the East
They are paying too high,
They say that your ore ain't worth digging.
That it's much cheaper down
In the South American town,
Where the miners work almost for nothing.'

At the end of the song we are left with the picture of a town now completely paralysed, a town which all will leave except those, broken in the struggle to keep it alive, who have nowhere left to go.

But throughout this period Dylan was also writing other songs which alternated between a facile, simplistic liberal protest (*The Times They Are A'Changing*, *Blowin' in the Wind*) and a personalistic refusal of communal responsibility (*Restless Farewell*) and at a more intimate level *Don't Think Twice It's All Right*. There was always an underlying hopelessness, a sense that things will not improve, so why bother trying? It was an undercurrent that was shortly to become the main thrust of Dylan's work.

Don't Think Twice . . .

My Back Pages is, as Michael Gray points out,² Dylan's disavowal of political involvement. In this song he places his espousal of 'liberty' firmly between the dusty leaves of an out-dated and badly-written autobiography:

'Equality, I spoke their word
As if a wedding vow.
Ah, but I was so much older then
I'm younger than that now.'

Dylan's cause for the change of heart centres around the recognition that because he has nothing he therefore has nothing to protect:

'Yes my guards stood hard when abstract threats
Too noble to neglect
Deceived me into thinking
I had something to protect. . . .'

The dismissal of the threats, which the slogans 'liberty' or 'equality' were set up to fight as 'abstract' looks suspiciously like the escapism of someone who is beginning to 'make it' and can afford to exist in a privileged pocket of personal 'liberty'. There is of course a conservative ideology at work in the assumption that political commitment is a way of protecting whatever it is that one possesses, but the major fault of this song (as of so many others) lies in the idea that to have nothing is to be heroic. The state of having nothing is not seen as transitional—a sacrificial transit state in the struggle for a better community—but as sufficient in itself. Dylan shakes the superflux to Them (sic).

This refusal of political involvement goes hand in hand with a new 'mystical' vision. The songs *Chimes of Freedom*, *Lay Down Your*

²*Song and Dance Man* by Michael Gray. This is one of the most intelligent books yet to have been written about a contemporary 'popular musician'. It is marred by a mixture of Leavisian narrowness (Gray in fact quotes Leavis completely uncritically) and a too-ready assumption that Dylan the supreme craftsman must have always 'meant something' intelligent if not profound in his many careless songs. The book is still pioneering if only in recognising that Dylan deserved detailed criticism rather than the usual deadly either-or: adulate or revile.

Weary Tune, and, most spectacularly, *Mr Tambourine Man* herald this phase. Dylan moves into a surreal, technicolour world of infinite possibility at the same time that he attempts to escape crabwise from the pincer-hold of a society which he believes wants to 'pigeon-hole' him. But his technicolour world turned very rapidly into a repetitious monochrome, the dream-turned-nightmare of the glutted, private sensibility.

The Uncommissioned Jester

Dylan the mythographer had always insisted that he had no real background—no home, no ancestry except the one which he chose to acknowledge which consisted of a mixture of musical and poetic influences. He styled himself as the incomprehensible outsider, society's orphan, estranged from all its standards ('I've got nothing, ma, to live up to') and essentially free from all its sins ('Don't you understand/It's not my problem'). He is also often deeply pitiless ('But there's no use in trying/To deal with the dying/Though I cannot explain that in lines'). Dylan was the uncommissioned jester, living outside the court in unspecified digs.

The social and personal isolation which became a clichéd topos of the standard blues song was transformed by Dylan into the principle of a kind of salvation. He relishes the isolation: it represents for him the only purgatory at the heart of social life in which purification is possible. As he sings to the pandered young lady in *Like a Rolling Stone*

'Nobody's ever taught you how to live out on the street
And now you're gonna have to get
Used to it. . . .'

one becomes aware that he is concerned, however perversely, for his subject's soul. But salvation is the wrong word, for that suggests the possibility of a better future, and all that Dylan can in fact offer is a de-mystified but no less hopeless present.

Dylan's escape route up to this time had always been a recurrent 'restless farewell'. When things grew intolerable he could always leave Maggie's Farm and all the responsibilities that it entailed:

'So I'll make my stand,
I'll remain as I am,
I'll bid farewell and not give a damn'.

When Dylan finally realised that one has to end up *somewhere* it was with a sense that he had been incarcerated.

Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues explores a world which is just as surreal as that we saw in *Mr Tambourine Man*: here, however, hal-

lucinary revelation no longer discloses the landscape of mystical reverie, but an arid area of betrayal and frustration :

‘All the authorities they just stand around and boast
How they blackmailed the sergeant-at-arms into leaving his
post’.

All the characters are placed in abstract relationships : one never finds out the cause of the betrayal. The sense of sterility and meaninglessness in all occasions is re-inforced by the constant reference to drugs of a much harder kind than the ones hinted at in the earlier ‘mystical’ songs. They have become a need, often unanswered, a fruitless dependence :

‘I cannot move, my fingers are all in a knot.
I don’t have the strength to get up and take another shot
And my best friend, my doctor, won’t even say what it is
I’ve got’.

At the end of the song Dylan claims that he’s had enough : he’s going back—to New York City. Hardly escape for anyone.

There is a constant ambiguity in Dylan’s exploration of the subterranean nightmare world he sees immediately beneath the surface of America’s affluent, complacent veneer. It is the same kind of ambiguity we find in Hopkins’ ‘Oh the mind, mind has mountains’. The same mixture of horror, fear and pride at ever having explored these forbidden lands informs Dylan’s mature work up to the time of his accident in 1966. *Desolation Row* (the title of one of his greatest songs) is certainly no place to live, but unless you’ve been there then you have no right to speak with authority about anything. Dylan’s waste land is peopled with crooks, whores, pushers, priests, policemen, a blind commissioner, a sexually-frustrated Ophelia, Einstein disguised as Robin Hood, the most ineffective of saviours. It’s all there. What one has to question is the presentation. The real criticism to be levelled against Dylan is not that he lacked realism (a notably slippery category), but that by allowing his despair to be the sole focus of his indictment he brackets the future of the human project within the crumbling failure of a bungled present. What made him, at this stage, into the most important singer-writer of his time (so that even a careful, intelligent and powerful artist like Joni Mitchell bears no comparison with him at his best) was the breadth of his vision, personalistically-based as it was. Dylan extended the possibilities of rock-music-as-commentary more than anyone else before or after him. Who else could have *sung* the following lines without seeming absurdly pretentious?

‘Praise be to Nero’s Neptune,
 The Titanic sails at dawn,
 Everybody is shouting
 “Which side are you on”?
 And Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot
 Are fighting in the captain’s tower
 While calypso singers laugh at them
 And fishermen hold flowers
 Between the windows of the sea
 Where lovely mermaids flow
 And nobody has to think too much about Desolation Row’.

Dylan delivers the lines with the sardonic I’ve-read-some-books-too-so-what? tone which he mastered and has never been superseded in. He managed to enlarge the narrow confines of rock music to include not merely literary plagiarism, but also a kind of spontaneous literary criticism—surely no mean achievement.

Not so unique

When Dylan finally emerged after his accident in 1966 he was a different musical figure. The sardonic prophet of doom, ‘the wicked messenger’ as he later described himself, was replaced by a country musician who had said his goodbye to the world of hallucinations and extremes. In his album *John Wesley Harding* ‘pity’ was said to enter his universe for the first time. The L.P. charts a search through various ineffective mythologies and ends with a despairing retreat into private relationship in the final song *I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight*. The whole album finds a sad (very sad) directional parallel in Jon Lennon’s song *God* in which the English superstar recounts all the beliefs he will not accept and ends with this rousing affirmation:

‘I just believe in me,
 In Yoko and me,
 And that’s reality’.

Ah well, back to the protozoic slime.

There was, interestingly, one song written at the same time which had stated the essential case of *John Wesley Harding* much more fully and less simplistically. The song was called *I Shall Be Released* though ironically enough it wasn’t. The only way that one could acquire it was by buying the bootleg album—a record cut and distributed without the recording company’s or the artist’s permission. The voice that emerges from this song comes recognizably from the *inside* of the asylum, and it rejects all forms of mythic self-protection, and

calls out for a kind of grace which will free the singer from his intolerable imprisonment. But there is no easy forgiving of enemies :

'They say everything can be replaced
 But every distance is not near,
 So I'll remember every face
 Of every man who put me here,
 I see my light come shining
 From the west unto the east.
 Any day now,
 Any day now,
 I shall be released'.

The 'they' of that song is once again firmly hypostatized, but this time there is no possibility of escape. Whereas in the song *It's All Right Ma* Dylan was able to claim '... it's not he or she or them or it that you belong to,' he is aware now, as the last verse makes clear, that to claim that you yourself, specifically, are not to blame, is to perpetrate an inhuman fallacy. Whereas Dylan had once been a Chaplin escape figure, disappearing from each catastrophic situation in the nick of time, he can now look hopefully only to the light that comes shining (in the deliberately biblical phrase) 'from the west unto the east'. Dylan's 'Any day now . . . I shall be released' is a plea rather than a prediction.

Country Pie

Late Dylan has been cliched and off the mark in a way that would have been inconceivable at a previous stage of his career. The retreat has been almost total, the only exception that springs to mind being his song *George Jackson*, a form of jingly musical pamphleteering which might well have made the Soledad brother cringe in his cell. Dylan has been in Johnny Cash land, minding his business, strumming his geetar: it's hardly surprising that he has not made much out of it musically. His attempt to place himself meaningfully in the community has resulted in this kind of effort :

'I'll marry me a wife, catch rainbow trout,
 Have a bunch of kids who call me pa'.
 That must be what it's all about. . . .'

The quality of Dylan's voice has always been a register of what he was trying to do. On the first L.P. the guttural anguish is recognizably within the folk-blues tradition: the version of *House of the Rising Sun* is filled with the growls and whines of the blues standard.

It is brilliantly delivered, but the rendering is that of a *poseur*: we feel that we are in the presence of one of our finest musical ventriloquists. By the time of the bootleg tape of *I Shall Be Released* Dylan's voice strains and almost over-reaches itself: he comes across as being too weary, pushed into sound only by the directionless energy of total despair. But *Nashville Skyline* has an assured, comfortably mellow tone to it throughout, the one exception being *Girl From The North Country*, on which he is accompanied by Johnny Cash. Here Dylan's voice seems to reach back to a quality it had formerly, but the performance is almost nostalgic—anguish recollected in tranquillity. On the later album *New Morning* he seems to be simply too tired to sing much at all. We are left with the picture of Dylan, the family man, providing entertainment for the folks. The cowboy who stares out at us from the cover of *Nashville Skyline* has the contented look of one who can leave the public world behind and go home to his wife's country pie, perhaps even accompanied once again by Johnny Cash, though hopefully not (not yet) that friend of a friend, Billy Graham.

Liberating Theology: Gustavo Gutierrez

by Páraic Réamonn

A theology of liberation purports to answer the question of the relation between Christian faith and the struggle for human liberation. From within the Bolshevik party, Bukharin and Proebrazhensky thought the two antithetical: 'A communist who rejects the commandments of religion and acts in accordance with the directions of the party, ceases to be one of the faithful. On the other hand, one who, while calling himself a communist, continues to cling to his religious faith, one who in the name of religious commandments infringes the prescriptions of the party ceases thereby to be a communist'.¹ But Gutierrez is a Peruvian who writes as a Latin American. Things in that strife-torn continent are less ossified, as in the third part of his book² he makes clear. The struggle for liberation is not the possession of one revolutionary group or set of groups who can

¹Bukharin & Proebrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism* (Penguin), p. 300.

²Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973) pp. xi, 323.